

*Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies*  
10 (2019/20) 15-16

## *We Are Here* *By Susan Ito*

In 1974

I was one of three Asian Americans  
in a brick high school nestled in  
the garden state.

We read Orwell and Hemingway  
Salinger and Dickens  
I came to understand that writers  
were dead, white, male.

*Aiiieeeee!* screamed its victorious arrival  
but I didn't hear it.  
I went to college and drowned  
in the science my parents wanted for me  
my only books were chemistry  
anatomy physics physiology biology

It took twenty years for me to hear the sound of Asian voices  
stunned to see "Asian American lit" in the course catalog  
when I was in grad school, finally freed from science

It took a minute  
for my throat to tighten, my eyes to blink  
at the sight of the Chinese American professor  
the room full of Asian American students  
the syllabus crammed with writers I had never  
heard of

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**Susan Ito** co-edited the literary anthology *A Ghost At Heart's Edge: Stories & Poems of Adoption* and the short memoir *The Mouse Room*. Her work has appeared in *Growing Up Asian American*, *Choice*, *Hip Mama*, *Literary Mama*, *Catapult*, *Hyphen*, *The Bellevue Literary Review*, and elsewhere. She is a MacDowell colony fellow, and has also been awarded residencies at The Mesa Refuge, Hedgebrook and the Blue Mountain Center. She has performed her solo show, *The Ice Cream Gene*, around the US. She is an advisory council member of the Writers' Grotto, and teaches at Mills College and Bay Path University. Her theatrical adaptation of *Untold*, stories of reproductive stigma, was produced at Brava Theater.

I learned about *Aiiieeeee!* and *Charlie Chan is Dead*  
*Making Waves* and the voices of so many

and when the class ended, we didn't want to end  
we didn't want to stop  
we wanted to drop our voices into that river  
now a torrent now unstoppable  
so we started Rice Papers:  
    for Asian American women writers  
    we told our stories, in between pots of rice  
    curry and lumpia, flan and roti and mochi

And a quarter century after that,  
I enter the classroom as the professor  
of Asian American literature  
The flood of choices, the tsunami of books  
poetry memoir essays graphic books  
of writers reflecting the vast diaspora  
is more than I can fathom  
more than my flimsy syllabus pages can hold.  
    I see my students blink. Their souls glow  
    in the mirrors of representation.

We are swimming  
neck-deep in stories  
That swell toward the horizon  
The voices coming from everywhere  
    the libraries are bursting now  
    the bookstores  
    the best-seller lists  
    the secret diaries  
    the internet exploding with Asian American stories  
All from that first voice, calling to others in the silence  
    calling out *Aiiieeeee!*  
    *We are here.*